

12 Keys to a Better Pitch

(Warning: Highly Idiosyncratic)

Melissa Ann Singer
Senior Editor, Tor/Forge

#1: RELAX!

Before the Pitch

#2: Research.

Review what your target publisher is publishing and make sure your project fits into the house's list. Try to find out if the editor or agent you're pitching to specializes, so you don't waste your time by pitching a young adult work to someone who only handles adult work, or a science fiction novel to someone who prefers mysteries.

#3: Prepare your Presentation.

Remember, you have a limited amount of time in which to make the pitch. If you have 5 minutes with an agent or editor, you don't want to spend more than a minute to a minute and a half making your initial pitch.

That gives you a minute or two for conversation between you and the editor or agent and a minute for the editor or agent to tell you how to submit, if you're invited to. The worst thing is when the person you're pitching through has to race through the instructions because you're out of time.

It's okay to write out your pitch. It's okay to bring index cards or sheets of paper to read from. It takes about a minute to read, aloud, a double-spaced sheet of paper.

Practice. Ask someone (preferably someone who has not read your manuscript) to stand in for the editor and ask questions (see #10). What questions you will be asked depends on your project and the editor, but some tend to recur.

At the Pitch

#4: RELAX!

#5: Wear comfortable clothing.

Don't worry about making an impression or sending a message with your appearance. Most editors and agents concentrate on the pitch, not the person.

#6: Skip the perfume/cologne. Don't smoke right before your pitch session. If possible, skip garlic and onions in the meal before the pitch.

Editors and agents will generally extend the same courtesies to you. Pitch sessions often take place in small, unventilated rooms. We need to be kind to each other.

#7: Carry as little as possible, but bring something to drink or otherwise moisten your throat.

You spend valuable pitch time setting down baggage. Plus, if you're nervous, you may drop things, which may make you even more nervous. And sometimes people leave things in the pitch room when they're done.

Don't put your bag on the table between you and the editor—it creates a psychological barrier that can make it harder for the editor to connect with you.

It's okay to take a drink or suck on some hard candy before or during the pitch. When people are nervous, their throats often get dry.

#8: Consider beginning by handing the editor or agent your business card.

I make notes about the author's project directly on her or his business card. It's best if an author's card is a standard card that has blank space somewhere and is light-colored.

#9: Do not bring manuscript—or anything else—to give to the editor or agent.

No proposals, query letters, writing or art samples, short fiction, clippings, reviews, books, discs, USB drives, *nothing*. If the editor or agent wants to see your work, you will be asked to send it.

#10: Be prepared to be interrupted and to hear No.

Editors and agents interrupt to probe deeper into your project. And also to move you along if time is running out.

Standard questions that you may hear (in random order):

How long is the manuscript?

What genre is it?

What inspired you to write this book?

What sort of research have you done?

Why are you the best person to write this story? (Especially if your main characters are members of marginalized populations but you don't appear to be, or if you appear to be focusing on an ethnic or religious group or a culture you do not seem to be part of. Yes, we're making judgments based on appearance when we ask these questions, and I'm sorry about that but there's such limited time in a pitch session that we have to make some snap judgments.)

What are you working on now?

Have you previously published at novel length?

Why is your main character the person to solve this crime, take up this quest, conquer the universe?

The editor or agent may ask about plot details, a character's motivations, your writing style, and more. Or they may have few questions. The number of questions you are asked has nothing to do with whether or not you will be invited to submit.

Editors and agents say no a lot. They have to—they receive hundreds, if not thousands, of submissions a year.

Please don't continue to sell the project after the editor or agent says no. We understand that being rejected hurts. But a rejection, even one delivered face to face, is not personal. If your project isn't right for the editor or agent, it's just not right. A good mantra, from the editor side: The Right Book for the Right Editor at the Right House at the Right Time.

#11: Don't be offended if the editor doesn't shake your hand.

She or he may be trying not to pass germs around. We've all had convention crud more times than we want to think about.

#12: RELAX!